

Oh hear ye, hear ye -

It is thus proclaimed the sole master of Star Trek and its related concepts is sire Paramount. Knight A. Decker defends the lands of Star Traks. M. Meneks is a poor peasant growing BorgSpace stories.

The Check Is In the Mail

The rarest of corporal sentients is the machine intelligence. Nonorganic bodies feeding on a variety of fuels, occurring in a multitude of shapes, surviving in a wide number of environments, the dozen machine "species" of the local galactic cluster came from an equally diverse background.

The ENT species, if a single individual could be called a species, was a giant machine of a size associated with large terrestrial planets. ENT orbited a guttering white dwarf, silent and seeming dead, except for occasional power fluctuations and massive discharges of gravitonic eddies. Rumor said ENT was built long ago by an ancient race, perhaps the first intelligence of a new universe, and set to determine the reason of existence - the answer to the question of life, the universe, and everything, as once succinctly stated. Contemplation had thus far lasted for billions of years with no end in sight; the final answer was anticipated with both dread and excitement by those who knew of ENT, but as none had survived an approach to the machine's bulk, it was unknown how much longer to the program's completion.

On the other hand, the Tic-Tok species was very young, barely sapient, and the only known example of a "naturally" evolved machine intelligence. Living in a vast "ecosystem" of run-away Von Neumann machines, part of a forgotten program to prepare a solar system for colonization, the Tic-Toks had only recently begun to explore their self-awareness.

In-between the spectrum of old and young, the other machine sophonts existed. Some had been specifically designed by organic parent species to function independently, others had bloodily left the arms of their progenitors; each had their own agenda, and in many ways, despite a vastly different origin, were similar in thought and desire to their organic "cousins."

Kogg was Xenig, a group of machines as vastly different from each other as they were widely dispersed about the local galactic cluster. The parents of the Xenig had forcefully expelled their silicon children from the nest two revolutions of the Milky Way galaxy prior, and then left the present plane of reality in a moment of transcendence. Ever since that time, the Xenig had been searching for a way to rejoin their parents; on one level lost children crying over their abandonment, and on another, very powerful beings on a dedicated mission. Unfortunately, inquiry into the scientific foundation of reality required money, and so the Xenig subcontracted with members of their species to GPS - the Galactic Postal Service. Kogg was one of those individuals.

Kogg was very proud of his - Xenig did not have genders, per se, but it was often convenient for nonmachines to assign a sex - record over the course of his thousand-year contract period. He was even thinking of taking the resign bonus and continuing for another five centuries. The wages, that which didn't get sent to the Fund For the Search of Transcendence, had long since paid off his current chassis and computational requirements, and even allowed a substantial amount of credits to be diverted to a savings fund in anticipation of a new ship-body in a century's time.

A sleek, black dart seventy-five meters long, Kogg had designed his current ship-body specifically for GPS work. A large hold was rugged enough to withstand antimatter explosions

of hazardous cargo, and a system of modular decks were outfitted to carry biologicals of fifty-three different atmospheric requirements. Engines, which were only produced by the Xenig for Xenig use and were the reason behind GPS demand for the sentient machines, appeared to be disproportionately small for the bulk of Kogg's chassis. A product of delving into the nature of reality, the engines were powered by a zero-point field array, capable of near instantaneous transportation to any place within the local galaxies, as long as an "energetic address", a kink in the fabric of reality akin to a fingerprint, was known. In other words, Kogg was the ultimate delivery vehicle.

Kogg was currently very much aware of a throbbing caused by uncontrollable surges along the pain processors of his secondary integrator circuits. He was presently docked at a routing center located in the galactic bulge of the Milky Way (Spiral #2 of the Local Group). The primary shone too much in the orange spectrum for Kogg's taste, although the effect may have been a product of the hangover he was currently nursing. A party had been hosted by Naln in celebration of his new chassis, complete with expanded processor block; the stimulant programs had been a wee bit on the strong side, to say the least.

"Careful in there! You are getting scratches on my deck plates! And can't you work a bit more quietly? How would you like someone to be stamping around in your innards, rearranging your guts?" yelled Kogg peevishly over his internal intercom system to the GPS biologicals which were loading delicate, environment-requiring cargo into the pressurized holds of decks five through eight. The mechanized loading of non-perishables had been completed hours ago, sometime before his persona had returned to his home processor block. The biologicals responded with several obscene phrases, quite aware of Kogg's debilitated condition, and taking advantage for their own amusement. Kogg could only glower at the creatures scrabbling about his interior. Finally he shut off his conscious awareness of the loading decks, focusing solely on his personal torment except for a few watchdog programs set to monitor cargo status.

Everything would be loaded soon, and the manifest/delivery schedule sent shortly after. Floating solitary in space for a few hours or days would fix the hangover...it always did.

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Like a hunting hound on the trail of a fox, Cube #347 was backtracking the subspace spoor left by the unusual warp signature of a ship of species #8511. Unfortunately, the ship in question had twisted and looped around chaotically from one inhabited system to the next on a convoluted trade route; with each star system, the cube had to drop out of transwarp and spend time conducting search patterns to determine the next vector to follow. And, to make life more difficult, as the trail became older, the subspace wake lessened, fading into the background frequencies.

At the moment, Sensors had a strong lock on the disturbances, most of the sensor grid realigned to protocols of her own devising to track with maximum efficiency. That also meant Captain, in keeping his command and control hierarchy closely meshed with that of Sensors' in order to alter course headings as appropriate, more than occasionally experienced odd sensations. The most current hallucination smelled like burnt dog hair; the scent disappeared as the course of the cube was nudged a few degrees.

{Your turn, Second,} said Captain to an unseen drone, one on the other side of the cube under the care of Doctor for routine maintenance.

{Okay. I spy with my little eye something that begins with...B.}

Captain examined Second's firewall, on the off chance he was leaking the answer, but the block around that bit of data was strong. {Um...Borg?}

{No, try again.} Pause, then before Captain could answer, {Doctor, what did you do? No, don't mess with that! I don't care if it is on the maintenance schedule, but I do like to see, you know!}

{Um...Bay? As in maintenance bay?}

{Thank you, Doctor. Now, if you want my arm, just ask nicely, and I'll remove it. You don't have to go yanking it off. No, Captain, try again.}

Captain was about to offer another answer when he felt the communications array codes accessed. Odd...the array was only used with unassimilated species, and never in a transwarp conduit. There had been unusual activity in the communication logs in the past few months, but the drone in question had been effective in covering his or her tracks. Not this time, however, as Captain cut the signal mid-pulse. He swiftly decoded the aborted communication.

{4 of 510, desist with these actions. And where did you find that Latinum Unlimited mail-order catalogue anyway?}

An embarrassed silence, then, {Well, I kinda found it several years ago when we were assigned to the clean-up mission of the species #8132 colony.}

{Go on.}

{I put it into memory storage, and only recently reloaded it for something to read. Some of the items caught my attention and, since we were near a subspace relay station, well, I thought I might order them.} The explanation hurriedly drew to a close.

Captain figuratively held up the electronic mail-order form. {Fart-In-A-Can...fake vomit...a calendar of Orion slave girls...pink flamingo lawn ornaments? There isn't even any consistency to the order, not to mention the /total/ lack of taste. One might think you flung darts at a hardcopy and decided to get whatever the missile landed on.}

Silence from 4 of 510.

{And how did you propose to pay for the items? We don't exactly have money or an economic system, you know.}

{I know. I kinda checked the COD payment plan.}

{Cash on delivery...very smart.} Captain's voice dripped sarcasm. {And I see you put the home address as "Exploratory-class Cube #347, somewhere in BorgSpace". Very precise. Not only would it take any hypothetical delivery company years to find us, they probably wouldn't approach in the first place, assuming the catalogue company didn't just deem the whole order a hoax.}

More silence.

{4 of 510...you will send an order cancellation, now, and then you will purge the catalogue from both active and stored memory. After that, I'll see what unpleasant job Delta can come up with. Her "to-do" list is as long as ever, and I'll give her the pleasure of picking the chore.}

4 of 510 accessed the communication array, quickly beginning his task. Captain passed the matter onto Delta, then refocused his attention on Second. {How the Ferengi /ever/ manage to spread that rubbish halfway across the galaxy is beyond my ken; one might think they could create personal wormholes on demand. What a bother. Anyway...B...B....how about bulkhead?}

{Right the third guess. Your turn. Doctor, you assimilated rodent, I am not one of your patient-pets from your prior life, and telling me "Shush, boy" and "That's a naughty boy" isn't appropriate. I'll complain as much as I want.}

Captain looked around his nodal intersection. {I spy with my little eye something that begins with V.}

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Kogg's hangover would not go away. The pain simply moved from system to system, reappearing every time he applied the mech equivalent of an aspirin. To make matters worse, Kogg could not suspend the pain circuits; the stimulant programs must have masked a black-market hack, and only the Progenitors knew what virus was hiding in his block now. The sole remaining action Kogg could do was to activate his hunter-seeker programs and hope his normal immune system subroutines would contain the problem.

Kogg hated getting the flu and being forced to work. The pulsating pain was making him cranky.

The jump to the first energetic address placed Kogg within the system of the Progenitors, his home world, the place his soul had been mixed by his four donor parents. The mail primarily consisted of decadal reports by those contracted to GPS work, although a few packages in the manifest declared specialty tools for the continuation of the Research. A routine transport.

Kogg jumped away as soon as he had offloaded the delivery, finding a quiet star to orbit. Perhaps a few additional hours to allow the hunter-seekers to run; and meanwhile, he could more closely examine the delivery schedule.

As Kogg read the schedule, he became increasingly irritated, the throb now located in his exterior sensorium, making it feel like his entire chassis was being repeatedly pounded on by a being with a very large hammer. The route was forecast to be an exasperating one.

Although most of the deliveries had known energetic addresses, five were ambiguous. Very annoying. "Zengu station, fifth planet from the yellow star near Hyrum anomaly" was the most precise of the examples..."Somewhere in BorgSpace" was the worst. Kogg would be forced to jump to the general area, then either make inquiries as to the exact location of the recipient or track the receiver down himself. And that wasn't the end of the problems to come.

Kogg hated COD...it always came down to him to convince the beings to cough up the cost of the items before delivery. Everyone always seemed to have left their money elsewhere, could I have my stuff please? Some entities did pay promptly, but the great majority had to look down the business end of Kogg's weapon systems, horrendous implements which were offshoots of reality research. After twisting in the disk of an event horizon, most suddenly found appropriate amounts of cash. Consequently, Kogg had never not delivered his cargo, which thus led to his exemplary record. Eight destinations were COD, including four of the five ambiguous addresses. No surprises there.

Kogg was in a bad mood. A dark mood. A mood so black interstellar space was as luminous as a giant blue star. All of the CODs thus far had been difficult, refusing to pay. One fluidic universe biological had even attempted to hijack him! The organic's bioship had been three times the bulk of Kogg's chassis, which had obviously emboldened the would-be pirate. Only after Kogg had tractored the other vessel and jumped into a hellacious pocket dimension had the hijacker finally surrendered to the inevitable for his package.

Kogg had simply blown up the next three CODs, releasing tension, and damning his perfect record to the stellar winds. The explosions had been spectacular, especially the moon.

Even the routine deliveries had overtones of aggression, Kogg ignoring safety protocols, disregarding the damage he caused to loading bays and docking cradles, verbally abusing the biologicals which unloaded his decks. The trek was almost over, however, with only one more delivery to make.

When he returned to the routing station, Kogg was going to find Naln and have a long talk with him. The pains were constant now; and if Naln did not have an antidote, someone's shiny new chassis was going to need a serious overhaul and paint job.

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The cube dropped out of transwarp. Although the subspace track was still strong, Sensors had identified an anomaly disrupting the trail immediately ahead and wanted to leave the conduit to perform sensor sweeps in normal space. The sight which greeted Cube #347 as it entered interstellar vacuum was spectacular.

A glowing sphere of nothingness, the heart of a singularity without the nasty side effects, blotted out background stars, subliminal hues of green and blue an oily sheen over black. The anomaly was only five hundred thousand kilometers distant - less than an atom's distance when viewed on the galactic scale - but dominated the scene in a way a thing less than two kilometers in diameter should not have had the ability to do. Then, like a soap bubble, the sphere silently collapsed, leaving behind a splinter of night.

{Identify!} barked Captain, prodding Sensors from her silent contemplation of the phenomenon.

{Sensors sees the most beautiful colors! [Harpy floor gems] and [butter scone fans]! Most beautiful!}

{Wonderful. What is it?}

{Oh...just a moment.} As the object rotated, now nearly invisible to the sensor grid except for an aurora of gravitonic emissions, Sensors came to a conclusion. {It is a mech ship. Mech species #3...Xenig. Engine specs are [okey-doke] with data; and unless mech species #3 has begun [freighting] their technology or someone has stolen a chassis - both extremely unlikely scenarios - that ship is mech.}

The sharp end of the black dart was now pointed directly at Cube #347. Gravity fields changed as the fabric of reality was modified, propelling the ship forward without the ostentatious display of impulse engines or reactive thrusters. The mech ship moved deceptively fast as it closed, slowing as it came within one hundred kilometers; at ten kilometers it stopped and took up a position of apparent passiveness.

There were no protocols to deal with the mech species. Borg tended to stick with the biological side of the sentient spectrum, namely because the advanced mech races were too dangerous to confront. The technological distinctiveness represented by those such as the Xenig would have to wait until the Borg's own offensive and defensive weapons could withstand aggressive contact. The Borg may crave perfection through assimilation, but they weren't intentionally stupid or suicidal.

The silent stalemate lasted for ten minutes, neither cube nor much smaller dart shifting position or initiating contact. On the part of the Borg, the Greater Consciousness was intrigued at the approach, but left it to the members of Cube #347 to take the brunt of any hostilities; matters elsewhere were much higher in importance than an isolated and otherwise insignificant event. In other words, the sub-collective was on its own, as usual. Finally the stand-off concluded as

patterns on the mech ship's black hull subtly altered, presenting large silver runes which translated to "Subcontracted Courier of the Galactic Postal Service - Deliveries Anywhere, Anytime, Anyplace".

A standard hail was intercepted by the cube. Captain cautiously answered.

"Is this Exploratory-class Cube #347? I've had the most awful time trying to find that particular Borg ship, and I must confess, all your cubes look pretty much alike but for the occasional size and power output differences. If this is not Cube #347, could you direct me to the proper sector of this galaxy? I have a schedule to keep and I'm behind as it is."

The communication did not trigger either audio or visual pathways, as there was no voice to translate nor picture to resolve. The message arrived in the dataspace, where it could be intercepted directly by the separate drones, who then heard it in their particular manner. Captain experienced the data as a lightly tenor voice sporting undertones of impatience.

The options to proceed were few. As always, many of the sub-collective voted to attack...or to flee...or to play dumb...or to.... Captain swayed the consensus towards delay, thus gaining more time to make a final decision; violent resistance by the mech ship was quite relevant and a distinct possibility.

"This is Exploratory-class Cube #347 of the Borg Collective. State the nature of the reason behind your query."

"Do you have to be so mechanical? I swear, I've heard the stories about your race before, but I never expected to meet the 'scourge of the galaxy' hull to hull. I am not impressed, to say the least." The transmission became more businesslike, "Anyway, Cube #347, I have several packages for you from Latinum Unlimited. It is COD, so I'll need some sort of payment before you can receive delivery. GPS accepts all forms of physical money, as well as credit transfers...as long as the account is with a major recognized company. Barter is acceptable too, although trade items must be appraised to the worth of resale value equal or greater to the price of the manifest bill and transportation costs. I am a certified appraiser, but due to space limitations, I will not take barter items too large to fit in my cargo holds.

"So what form of payment do you want? Oh, I'll also need to receive some sort of positive identification before final delivery is made."

"No payment."

"What do you mean, no payment?"

"We do not want the items."

"I hauled this crud out here for nothing?" A tremor of some emotion colored the question.

"We canceled the order sometime ago."

"I toted all this nonsense junk out here for absolutely nothing?" The voice was rising in pitch. "I have spent the last week jumping from address to address, asking about Borg sightings, to be given the brush off?" Captain tried to interject a reply, but was ignored. "Will this nightmare never end? My record is in shambles, any resign bonus will be less than stellar, the Progenitors only know how much GPS will take out of my paycheck for settlement damages...and that damn pain will not go away. I feel like someone is slowly tearing my chassis apart with a plasma-heated crowbar.

"Cube #347...if you know what is good for you, please designate a method of payment. I don't want to terminate your existence, but I must either make a proper delivery, or be able to demonstrate delivery was not possible. The latter option is only open when the recipient in question is deceased." Attention was now fully, painfully, directed at Cube #347. A strong impression of sweating palms and nervous facial tic colored the communication.

"But we don't /want/ the items. Return to sender?"

"GPS would rather you were atoms than face the lawyers of Latinum Unlimited...that is one mean catalogue company."

An emergency decision cascade rolled through the dataspace. A rapid retreat was the consensus.

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Kogg was startled as he detected power surging not in the weapon systems of the Borg cube, but through propulsion. Cube #347 slipped into a transwarp conduit and disappeared, leaving the mech ship floating alone.

Interstellar wind flung the occasional molecule of elemental hydrogen against Kogg's sensitive chassis; as the other ship sped away, backwash of shed metals, paint chips, large molecules, and other debris slammed into the hyperreactive hull. The pain seemed to have finally centered itself in the exterior senses, which, on biological terms, made it feel like his skin had been badly sunburned and subsequently abraded with sand before someone had poured salt on the wounds. Agony was affecting mental processes as Kogg attempted to deal with pain overload. In consequence, the Borg ship, through cause and effect linking which normally would have been abandoned in the early stages of formation, was fixated on as the primary reason behind the most recent wave of suffering.

Cube #347 would pay for their mail, or they would be reduced to a state similar to that shortly after the Big Bang. Straightforward logic demanded it.

Tracking the conduit direction was simplicity. Kogg sighted an intersection point five light years distant, made calculations which were automatic and second-nature, then fell into his personal wormhole.

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Captain, responding to the general sentiment permeating the rest of the sub-collective, was feeling much relieved. After several hours at high transwarp, including three random changes of heading, Cube #347 cautiously dropped back into normal space to determine exact current position. The species #8511 trail was growing cold and the assignment had to be continued.

The mech ship quietly waited at the coordinates of emergence. Captain did the equivalent of slamming on the emergency brakes, flooding the propulsion system with the command codes to stop. The mech ship did not flinch, even as the much larger cube came to a complete halt with less than one hundred meters of vacuum between the two vessels.

Kogg's communication to Cube #347 did not follow standard hail protocols, but instead powerfully projected into the sub-collective's mentality. "Borg cube, what will be the method of payment? You will have three chances to rectify your prior error. Fleeing is not an option."

To the disbelief of Captain, and the others of the cube, the tiny ship lanced a tractor beam, easily piercing robust shields. Weapons automatically began to randomly modify the shield harmonics, a common defense employed by nonassimilated species, to no avail. The mouse turning to attack the cat would probably best describe the feelings reverberating within the dataspace; or the shock a target species ship felt when a cube swept in.

Captain tried to back away, but found the larger cube could not budge the smaller mech

ship. Delta began to bring auxiliary warp cores on line, first one, then two, then five, and finally all ten. Eleven BorgStandard power cores, each more powerful singly than systems installed on the vessels of most of the species of the galaxy. Going nowhere fast, was the appropriate phrase. Data from Sensors' hierarchy indicated an unusual gravity field and tachyon-neutrino emissions. Delta cut power to the auxiliary cores they could overload.

"One chance down. My turn."

Nothingness swallowed the linked duo.

The absence of exterior sensor data was suddenly rectified as the rip in the fabric of reality was restored. Space...was not empty. The universe did not follow expected constants, although the physical machinery on the cube automatically adjusted. The area around the ship had the consistency of watery mucus, the extremely diffuse substance distorting incoming information. A subspace link to the Collective still existed, so the Borg had a presence somewhere nearby in the immediate universe. Part of the sub-collective completed its comparison of specs to the universe catalogue, coming to a disturbing conclusion.

Fluidic space...the home continuum of species #8472.

A recipe for panic as a reconfigured sensor grid picked up the long range shadows of fifteen bioships, more than enough to destroy a Battle-class ship, much less an Exploratory-class with an imperfectly assimilated compliment. Species #8472 was heading directly for Cube #347, and would come within weapons range in two hours.

{What do we do?} called many members in terror.

Yelled a majority: {Flee!}

But the cube could not flee, could not budge from the clutches of the mech ship any better in fluidic space than it could in normal space. A panic loop initiated, one which Captain and Second, along with those of command and control they could rally, could not break. Out of sheer desperation, the command code of stasis sleep was sent over the nets, abruptly quieting mentalities as the parameters of the cube were literally reset into a condition present only at the beginning of new assignments.

Captain reawoke several minutes later, blinking awake as his mind automatically reached out for assignment directives. He encountered a dormant program which rapidly expanded, reloading the current problem in a matter of seconds. Captain began to slowly activate one hundred drones at a time, quelling panic before it could develop. Within thirty minutes, the bioships were significantly closer, but the sub-collective was relatively calm.

Kogg sent a polite request for conversation at the same time the hierarchies of Delta and Weapons were collaborating to begin a manufacturing of nanites and delivery system based on data of the one successful technology of fighting species #8472. Unfortunately, termination still ran good odds. Captain strained to keep the lid on the reemergence of a panic loop.

"What do you want now?" snapped Captain. "Are you a sadist? If you wanted to destroy us, you surely have faster methods at your disposal than waiting for species #8472 to come and tear us apart."

A puzzled voice: "I...wait a minute...your signature changed. I only hear one speaking...well, it doesn't matter. I just wanted to inform you we'll be sitting here - you hopefully contemplating your bad decision - for a time." The communication abruptly ended, and attempts at reinitiating contact were useless.

Stress. For the next eighty-three minutes, the majority of the sub-collective could only watch in impotent anticipation as the bioships closed the distance. The full hierarchies of

Weapons and Delta were rapidly modifying torpedoes to act as delivery devices, while Assimilation attempted to propagate the special nanites. Unfortunately, it was the latter process which was the bottleneck of the entire operation; in a crude effort to increase production, assembly nanites were being dumped into vast barrels of neurogenic gel and metal-enhanced nutrient slush.

With less than three minutes until the bioships came into mutual range of long-distance weapons, the first of the torpedoes were being loaded with relatively small payloads of nanites, still in their growth media. There was no time to strain the miniature machines from the slush. It could only be hoped effectiveness, already not expected to be high, would not be further diminished because of the semi-liquid contaminant. Calculated functional englobement of exploded munitions was a diameter of only fifty kilometers.

Just as the last seconds were counting down on a backwards running digital clock suspended on an intranet board, just as Sensors began to register the aligning of bioships into wheel arrangement with a single vessel at the hub, a sphere of empty velvet was flung over Cube #347. When it disappeared, both Borg and mech ship were back where they had begun in normal space.

Commitment to attack had already been initiated; even as the cube reemerged from fluidic space, Weapons was marking the only available target - Kogg. Before Captain could halt the forthcoming action, Weapons sent eight modified and five conventional torpedoes towards the mech ship, accompanying it with a diversion of antimatter bomblet chaff.

Highly ineffectual would be the best description of the outcome. As the antimatter annihilated itself with a display of liberated energy and wash of electromagnetic static, the torpedoes splashed against Kogg's shields. The modified torpedoes, in addition to physically breaking up, sloshed their contents onto parts of the black chassis, gel briefly glowing blue with green sparkles.

Captain managed to bully the weapon hierarchy under control before they could begin wielding other, equally useless offensives.

"Very unwise. There goes chance number two."

Kogg really, really hurt. There was minimal damage to his superstructure, on the order of a mild scrape or two, but the torpedoes had stung!

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Deep in the subconscious programs of Kogg's central processing block and on the ceramometallic pathways which were the Xenig equivalent of nerves, a siliconian version of flu lurked. A parasite based not on physical parameters, but of trinary digital processes, it thrived in electronic hardware, disguising itself as subprocesses of local programs to survive.

This particular mech flu had taken up residence in the subconscious monitors of the exterior sensors, obstructing the shut-down of current to chassis pain processors. The virus needed the continuing incoming stimuli from sensors in order to mask its presence from the host consciousness, giving itself an increased chance it would be able to mindlessly follow its programming and pass on copies of itself to other Xenig.

As the neurogenic gel soaked into stress fractures of hull plates, it interfered with sensor data.

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The wormhole terminated, collapsing from the pair of linked vessels. Stars shone throughout the firmament again, pulsars and other familiar stellar navigation aids proclaiming the puzzling fact the Cube #347 seemed to have not moved from its original spatial location. Nothing horrible could be noted about the current universe; the fundamental parameters fitted the native one. The only clue that Kogg had moved the cube elsewhere in the cosmos was a slight adjustment of the tau factor. Perhaps an alternate timeline, as opposed to a fundamentally different dimension like fluidic space?

Captain grabbed one of the multitudes of communications which flooded the local subspace radio frequencies. It appeared to be a broadcast of a children's show. A large purple targ stood in the center of a stage, behind which was a fake town; children of many species flocked around the personified animal, playing an unknown game. Painted on the backdrop sky, a sun with a face bearing the likeness of a female human shone. Suddenly all the younglings ran to the targ, setting up into a line and beginning to sing.

"I love you. You love me. We are a Fun Federation family...."

As realization dawned as to the nature of the alternate timeline, members of Cube #347 began to scream in horror. This time Captain led the sub-collective in panic.

Eavesdropping on those specific subspace fractional frequencies used by the Borg, Kogg could hear the rising anxiety on Cube #347. Occasional aborted attempts of communication directed at him began a whining beg for mercy or rapid apology. Kogg was getting the idea that this particular cube did not follow the expected behavior he had heard about the Borg, but that did not matter.

The sounds of suffering meant the recipient was nearly ready to pay for the packages...Kogg had led many down the road of capitulation. The thought almost made the pain, now a constant background ache, lessen in places on his hull.

Wait a minute...the agony was definitely less in spots, specifically, those areas where the substance from the torpedoes had splashed against hull plates. A self-diagnostic of his chassis and skin sensors, as well as a close examination by submechs, showed an unknown substance seeping into the minute imperfections present from age and repeated stress of jumping. Small machines on the nanometer scale were also perceived, but careful experimentation involving selective "washing" of affected areas with a reality shimmer showed the nanites were not the agents responsible.

Kogg sterilized the rest of his hull from the machines as they appeared to hold the slight possibility of infecting his processor block should they manage to burrow into sensitive systems; Kogg already had enough problems with his on-going hangover. With a lessening of the suffering, Kogg's mental functions were beginning to work with increased clarity, shaming him with the callousness of his actions since he had left the routing station. An idea was coming into focus, one which would save his personal dignity, and buy him time to jump back to base to permanently rectify the pain problem.

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Impotent screams of terror abruptly cut as black engulfed sensors, as effective a sedative

as the hooding of a mewed falcon. Whimpers continued to echo both in net and aloud when Cube #347 registered return of the universe to its proper place. Captain began to firmly lock weapon functions, transporters, propulsion, any and every system which could conceivably annoy the insane postal mech. As he reviewed the analyzation of the ship, he added atmospheric venting and the active sensor systems to the list. No need to take chances.

"Method of payment?" boomed Kogg's transmission, a note of lightness now present. The mech actually seemed to be enjoying torturing the helpless cube. The Borg /never/ played with their victims...never!

As the cube intranet echoed with sobbing and calls for mercy, Captain returned "Listen to us, we implore! We don't have money! We don't have credit cards! We will do what we must for packages we don't want, but we don't want to go back to that last place! Fluidic space is preferable!" Damn the Borg Public Relations department! All thoughts of pride were tossed down the nearest blackhole; dying for the Collective was one thing, being the random target of a mech having a bad decade was another.

"Hmmm..." said Kogg, "you present an interesting problem. I don't think the GPS has ever actually delivered anything to the Borg before. However, I do have a solution. Barter."

"What do you want? Information? Technology? A complete wash and wax?"

Silence, as if the mech were pondering possible cargos. The answer came after several stress-filled minutes, "While the last is tempting, it is not good enough. Last chance!"

"NONONONONO!!" Gravitonic warping which was the precursor of ripping reality registered for several seconds before dissipating.

"Hah! Just kidding! Boy, did you jump. Hello? Anyone listening?"

The sub-collective would have found itself needing four thousand pairs of trousers, had digestive functions of the individual drones not been arrested. As it was, minds were quite paralyzed. When Captain could mentally manipulate communication again, the reply was a decidedly weak affirmative.

Kogg continued, "Geesh, no sense of humor. Anyway, I've come to a solution. I think ten barrels of that blue junk - five hundred gallon range, please - you had in those torpedoes you hit me with would suffice to cover expenses." Pause. "And if you don't like the offer, I suppose I could always find someplace else to discuss the matter. There's this lovely little pocket dimension I know..." The voice trailed off suggestively.

The sub-collective had no argument to that proposal.

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Kogg happily transported the multitude of packages to the designated coordinates on the battered Borg ship. In return, the first five barrels of superior quality neurogenic gel were deposited in his own cargo area; internal submechs quickly moved the containers to deck #2 and secured them against sudden accelerations.

The remaining five casks of gel were beamed to a position exterior to Kogg's hull, where he subsequently grabbed them in separate manipulator beams. Careful application of gravity pinpoints warped the metal of the containers, spilling the gel into large globes of transparent blue goo. Kogg subsequently dispatched all his available submechs to vacuum, where they scooped out small spheres of the material to spread over every hull plate, every sensor blister. The ever-present pain soothed to a dull ache as the neurogenic gel bonded to the molecular structure of Kogg's chassis.

"Payment accepted. Delivery completed. Have a nice day and remember GPS for all your mail needs."

Kogg jumped into comfortable nothingness, address set for a particular routing station. Although mental processes were now sound enough to deal with Naln, the consequences of resistance on his part to coughing up a more permanent antidote would be severe. The tribulations the Borg had experienced would be insignificant in comparison.

The items were jettisoned into interstellar space after Kogg disappeared from the sensors. The pink flamingo serenely spun head over feet in a trajectory which would take it near a star about the time most of the suns in the galaxy were black cinders radiating heat just above the ambient background temperature. Missing was the "realistically artificial" aquarium plants, but a few multicolored pieces of molded plastic were insignificant. The blankness of Doctor's thoughts on the matter when queried was suspicious, but not relevant.

Once again, Cube #347 had been completely embarrassed, especially concerning the alternate timeline. In this case, there was nothing the sub-collective could do to remedy the discomfiture, the Xenig well out of the realm from which to enact revenge. Well...revenge was irrelevant, as was the satisfaction gained by executing it, but the thoughts could be entertained for a moment or two before being purged from the dataspace.

Species #8511 was another story. Accessible eventually, the trail still present, that particular race would have to suffice. There was no enmity behind the need to utterly destroy species #8511, no transference of frustration, no motive of revenge, just the pure quest of perfection through assimilation and the desire to share that perfection with all races. No...nothing postal about it.